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Author(s): James W. Carey

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Journalism and Criticism: The Case of an Undeveloped Profession

James W. Carey

It is a truism, albeit a contentious one, that in the United States there is no tradition of sustained, systematic, and intellectually sound criticism of the press. The press is certainly one of our most important institutions but in serious attention it ranks slightly ahead of soccer and slightly behind baseball. The press is attacked and often vilified, but it is not subject to sustained critical analysis—not in public, and rarely within universities or the press itself.

On each occasion that I have attempted to argue this truism, especially with journalists, I have found myself launched into abrasive discussions about press councils, former vice-presidents and jailed newsmen—interesting topics all but rather beside the important point of criticism. The very idea of criticism has become anathema to journalists and the word itself has become a semantic beacon which unerringly attracts a host of emotional moths, some legitimate and some merely reflections of the psychology of the beleaguered. Publishers, editors and journalists, until their redemption by the Watergate indictments, felt encircled by an indifferent judiciary, a hostile administration, an untrusting public, and even some apostates in the lower ranks. The press, so it is argued, has developed its own “credibility gap,” caesarism is rampant in the White House, and the public cannot distinguish between the Bill of Rights and the codes of the Inquisition. The subject of criticism has become rather too emotionally charged, and the press at its conventions and in its editorial pages is reacting with the grim-faced seriousness and beleaguered patriotism of Robert Taylor in the final scene of “Bataan.”

The task of this paper is to demonstrate that a tradition of press criticism does not exist in the United States, that a critical tradition is indispensable to the operation of democratic institutions, and that journalism criticism, properly conceived, is the criticism of language. To sustain this entire argument it will be necessary, however, to sketch in some of the historical background of journalism.

Journalism as a distinguishable human activity is only about three hundred years old. It came about when a particular class of people, largely in England and portions of Western Europe, developed a particular hunger for experience: a desire to dispense with the traditional, epic, and heroic and to know about that which is common, useful, unique, original, novel, individual, new—news. However common this desire appears to be now, it was a rather radical appetite, and one looked upon with exceeding displeasure by most of the 17th and 18th centuries. Behind this appetite were two motives: a desire to possess the kind of knowledge—news—that would support the growth of a commercial society and, perhaps less urgently, a desire to expand, through knowledge, the boundaries of political freedom. The group possessed by this appetite and inspired by these motives we commonly call the “middle class.” This class gave birth to four characteristic modes of expression: the essay, the novel, journalism and the scientific report. While science and scientists were somewhat protected by an essentially medieval tradition of academic freedom, the novelists, the essayists, and journalists had to struggle to secure a right of expression that was not in any way secured by tradition or common law.

We are now accustomed to seeing this struggle, largely carried on by and for the middle class, as part of a “long revolution,” a revolution which, as Raymond Williams has suggested in his book with that title, has three distinct components. First, a democratic revolution representing the rising aspiration of people everywhere to govern themselves and to make the decisions controlling their lives without concession of this right to any group, class or nation. Second, an economic revolution which has transformed the nature of work and association and distributed or promised to distribute a larger share of wealth to all persons. Finally, a cultural revolution which aims to extend the process of learning and the skills of literacy and other forms of communication to all people and to expand and more fully distribute the cultural legacy of what we call “civilization.”

We are also accustomed to characterizing this “long revolution” as the slow, sporadic, halting but irresistible rise of democracy, and in seeing the expansion of freedom in cultural, political and economic matters as being the central story which binds these three “revolutions” together. But democracy as a form of political life is essentially a theory of criticism and criticism, properly construed, is

indispensable to the idea of freedom. Now why are criticism and democracy so indissolubly connected?

The rise of democracy and the forms of expression mentioned involved the displacement of other men, institutions, and forms of knowledge—forms we collectively and misleadingly call medieval. With the displacement of the church and aristocracy, to make it more concrete, everything in culture became problematic. With nothing given, with tradition dislodged, revelation discredited, pious scholasticism discarded, with, in summary, the death of absolutes and the loss of authoritative texts to interpret experience, everything in life became open and in dispute. Truth was no longer a fixed and final apprehension, set in tradition, revealed in scripture, and authoritatively interpreted by Crown and Pope. The final product of this shift was the growth of democracy, but central to the growth of democracy was the growth of criticism for the first arena in which this liberation was experienced was in the essentially critical discipline of science.

In a world with no fixed and final truths, without authoritative texts, how could truth and knowledge be derived? The answer was everywhere the same: by turning to experience itself, by examining, in the cardinal metaphor of the day, nature; or, to put it colloquially, by looking at the evidence for oneself. This novel idea of directly observing nature gave rise to the notion of a report: a rendering through language of one's observations of the vivid particularity of nature. In order to accomplish this novel task at least three things were needed: a set of procedures for observation that were clear and rigorous, a language of description and observation that was purged of as much emotional overtone as possible, and a forum of criticism that would correct and complete observations.

The form and procedures of the report perhaps were worked out, as Lewis Mumford has argued, in the practice of keeping the ship's log during the long voyages of exploration: the prompt record of observed events, the plotting of the ship's course, the transcription of topographic matters to maps, the recording of solar and stellar sightings, the observation of migratory bird habits, the systematic measurement of water depths to facilitate safety on landing, and the precise observation of animal and botanical life in new places.

The refashioning of language to be an instrument of precise description took place only through prolonged struggle and over at least two centuries. The history of this process cannot be told here,

but it should be noted that it was not until 1755 that the first dictionary was produced in English and, therefore, it was not until the end of the 18th century that a set of stable, uncolored denotative terms were available for general use. The conflict over language continued throughout the 19th century between, in England, the Benthamites or utilitarians on one side and an older, conservative tradition of language represented by Coleridge and Newman that was essentially religious and poetic in inspiration.

The critical forum was present in the social organization of science itself. The achievement of the new sciences was that they opened an important part of the visible world to systematic observation. The methods of the sciences provided a machinery for rather impersonally resolving disputes. Prior to the rise of the sciences the major intellectual method was dialectics, a method still used in our courts. This method places emphasis on persuasive appeal and personal force and easily devolves into mere eloquence and bad-tempered disputation. The sciences emphasized systematic observation and the full disclosure of results. The scientific report was an attempt to resolve disputes by evidence, reasonableness and humility.

So great were the achievements of the procedures of observation, the new modes of language, and the fora of criticism that they were extended or at least attempts were made to extend them to other departments of life including art, politics and journalism. They were not always as successful in these other departments where passion and interest run deeper, but the extension of the method of democratic criticism always requires the following: some clear description of how we observe what we observe, a language relatively neutral in terms of effect or emotional coloring, a forum of response to observation and language, a desire to take account of contrary findings, a willingness to discard untenable hypotheses, to correct errors and to revise postulates—these are the manners of science, indeed ideally conceived of democratic life generally.

There are many problems in extending the method of science to the life of society generally. Foremost among them is that for science to operate properly its methods must be accessible to everyone *competent to master them*. When the scientific ideal was extended to politics, the same notion prevailed. Political action and rhetoric were not to be available to everyone but only to those competent to master them. We know from our own history the

deep conflict over the definition of competence in these matters. Originally, we believed only the industrious, property-holding middle classes possessed such competence. But in the 19th century the democratic impulse was too strong, and all barriers to participation were grudgingly but inexorably overcome. The political community was increasingly broadened to include everyone, and all publics were drawn into the political process.

We have always recognized and trembled before a persistent danger in this process. We can put the danger succinctly: if the critical process in democracy depends upon precise information and the habits previously enumerated, then how can the sources of information be kept untainted by censorship and, at the same time, escape the vulgarity and irresponsibility that mass participation presumably portends? In politics and culture we have attempted what no scientific community could tolerate, and we are left, therefore, with a dilemma from which there is no easy escape. In the act of incorporating the entire community into the political and cultural process, we have provoked a persistent temptation, particularly in a commercial society, to pander to the tastes and self-deceptions of large audiences, a process that ends in vulgarity and irresponsibility. Such a situation invites censorship or some deliberate political control and in the context of democratic life there is only one alternative to censorship: the same critical analysis must be turned upon the sources of information and culture and their operation that is regularly turned upon nature and our political institutions. It is not a matter of "shooting the messenger" but of subjecting him to systematic, critical public analysis lest he be controlled by censorship or corrupted by his own power and illusions.

The press requires a strong critical tradition that makes an active and continuous response in terms of factual detail, unemotional language and articulate values to the materials presented to the public. We expect no less in politics, for we do not want the pronouncements of government to go uncriticized. There is no social institution exempt from this process.

Prior to applying these considerations to the press, we need to introduce three additional historical facts which will clarify the ground of argument.

First, we must recognize that the role of the press in society has radically shifted in the last hundred years despite the general continuity in language we use to describe it. We now often think of the

press as somehow representing the people, acting as an adversary of government on behalf of the people. This is a relatively modern notion. Originally the critical forum was provided by encounters between the government and the community or their representatives. The press constituted a third voice which did not substitute for the people but merely amplified the critical process, added information to it by its own activities and represented the interests of a political party, a commercial property and a constitutionally protected technology.

When government is reasonably small and in important matters local, there is no need to look for critics; they are everywhere. To put it in the jargon of sociologists, the critic is not here a specialized social role any more than he is among artists when they can read their work to one another. Similarly when life proceeds on a human scale the press operates in a critical way only in defense of its own values and in the supplying of information. It is, in no sense, a critic who represents the public.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, government, at all levels, became increasingly remote from people. It became more professionalized, less subject to direct control, more mysterious in its operations, less bound by common language, ties and encounters. Increasingly, the press moved into this vacuum and saw itself in a new role: as a voice of the community, as a shaper and expositor of community opinion. It interconnected the members of the community by assembling them into an audience and gave expression to their concerns and values. Less now an independent critic than a representative of the community, it increasingly rationalized its position not in terms of the rights of the press but in terms of the needs and rights of the community—a view which has since passed into our common language as the “people’s right to know.” The press, in a way, became a professional critic operating on behalf of the community.

This entire process proceeded as “the people” or “the public” that was constantly invoked became an increasingly amorphous entity. Everyone spoke for the people but no one could quite figure out who they were, how they were organized, how one might listen to them. Moreover, because the press specifically and the media generally assembled the audiences so dear to advertisers and politicians, American politics and culture increasingly became based on the premise that public opinion was to be molded and shaped within

the media. Public opinion was then measured by commercial firms on the terms it was shaped—"whom do you prefer for the Democratic nomination, Muskie or McGovern?"—in what increasingly appeared to be a tautology in which government and the press both pretended to represent a "public" with whom they had but little contact. In a word, the critic, the press, like government itself, became increasingly remote and unresponsive to the public they presumed to represent.

A third, and more elusive, change concerned the whole process of reporting and the role of journalism as a critical aspect of contemporary culture and politics. As previously suggested, the entire "democratic" attitude toward knowledge was founded on the notion of going and looking for oneself, of reporting the procedures by which this looking took place, and having the report and procedure subjected to criticism. In the 19th century this conception of "objectivity" was altered, however, partly under commercial pressure and partly under the pressure of events. Rather than reporting events the press increasingly reported someone else reporting events. To square the circle one had to have at least two spokesmen, two observers of the events—one Democratic and one Republican—and objectivity became the square root of four. The change is of some moment. The press did not for its most important stories observe the events. It reported what spokesmen, sources, authorities of different stripes said about the events. The press became the conveyor belt of observations rather than the originator of them.

This change undercut the finest tradition of journalism, for the audience was exposed to the opinions of the paper in the editorial columns and the opinions of "spokesmen" in the news columns. In both cases the mode of reaching the public was based upon purely verbal reasoning in something less than open debate. The method ends up putting a premium on forensic skill and personal force—even more so in television—and descends into mere eloquence and wrangling unchecked by experience and evidence.

It has the more unfortunate consequence of shifting the language of journalistic reporting from that of hard and precise meanings, and fulsome descriptions of "facts," to emotion-laden, highly charged drama, a situation never more unfortunately exposed than when this condition of the press was exploited during that bad-natured period we now call the McCarthy era.

This observation is not true of all journalism, perhaps not even

much of it. But this change in the nature of reporting has led to a regular public diet, in many of our most crucial areas, of the facts of opinions rather than the facts of journalistic objectivity.

With that background let us return to the problems of the criticism of journalism and the tradition of journalistic criticism. Let us begin from this simple observation, contained implicitly at least, in everything that has been previously said: democracy is not only a form of politics; it is a form of community. As perhaps our greatest theorist on these matters John Dewey argued, democracy is a form of associated life, of conjoint communicated experience. But he also argued, in *The Public and Its Problems*, that today all individuals find their interests and concerns conditioned by large impersonal organizations and consequently the possibility of community as well as ethical fulfillment is seriously compromised. Dewey insisted upon communication and public debate as the instrument of realizing society as a process of association, as a community. This process of criticism, of debate, became in his thought the means by which human experience can be expanded and tied together not only in the domain of politics but in all the domains of our experience.

One of the domains of experience shared by members of modern society is that experience of the media of communication, the newspapers particularly. And this is a domain about which there is little debate of significance out in the brightly lit arena where the public lives.

Perhaps herein lies the answer to those questions so quick to the lips of newspaper executives: Why do newspapers have a credibility gap? Why do all those polls show the public distrusting or at least lacking confidence in the newspaper? There are few modern institutions that engender much confidence in the public because they are so persistently remote from the public and because they mask their operation in the cloak of professional authority which effectively forestalls the critical involvement of the public. That is, the press is one of those large, impersonal organizations of which Dewey spoke, an organization which in representing so assiduously its own interest seriously compromises the possibility of community. It is also an organization about which there is little that can be called debate or criticism or communication.

These observations cut against the received opinion of many newspapermen. They feel under rather constant attack and do not

respond kindly to anyone they regard as a critic. But attack is not criticism, and it is the absence of substantial criticism that makes the sporadic attacks on the press by government and others so telling.

Let us now assume that all areas of experience, all institutions of modern society, must be subjected to criticism. This criticism must be based upon precise observation, clear procedure, unemotional language, subject to the cooperative correction of others, and occurring in the public forum where all affected by the institution can at least observe and comment on the critical process. Moreover, it must clarify our experience of the institution and scrutinize the values upon which the institution is based. The only things sacred in this process are the rules and procedures by which it is done and the manners necessary to make this a continuing process.

If we assume that the newspaper press is the most general forum in which this process can operate, let us look at an omnibus newspaper like the *New York Times*. In its pages, particularly the Sunday edition, one finds information, analysis, criticism of every contemporary institution. It treats art, architecture, literature, education, politics, business, religion, finance, film, and so forth. We need not discuss how well it treats these several institutions it covers. The record is, of course, quite uneven. But that aside, the fact remains that one institution is curiously exempt from analysis and criticism—the press itself. The *Times* does, of course, deal with books and devotes a daily and Sunday column to television. Aside from the quality and relevance of this, the *Times* is virtually silent about the newspaper: itself in particular, the medium in general. A rise in the wholesale price of newsprint will be reported, but that, we all know, is merely to signal an impending rise in the price of the newspaper itself. The newspaper does not, perhaps it cannot, turn upon itself the factual scrutiny, the critical acumen, the descriptive language, that it regularly devotes to other institutions. And one of the things readers are curious about, one of the things that is an important fact of their experience, one of the things they must understand if they are to critically know anything, is something critical about the newspaper itself.

There are a number of responses to this argument that must be anticipated. The first argument heard from many editors, namely, that “we are criticized all the time, that criticism of the press is abundant,” simply will not wash. The critical literature in all the fields about which newspapers report, from art through education,

to government and science, is enormous and often of quite high quality. For every first-class work of journalistic criticism there are a hundred exemplary works of literary criticism. There is, simply, no important critical literature concerning journalism and while the newspaper fosters such literature in every other field, it does not foster it in its own domain.

It is possible to name critics of high quality in most fields, but in journalism beyond Ben Bagdikian there is no one. Why are people not drawn to the criticism of journalism as they are to education, literature, film, architecture, religion? What criticism of journalism exists is, unlike literature, episodic, of generally inferior quality, and without foundation in a tradition. Given the importance, the self-proclaimed importance, of journalism this is a rather curious fact to explain.

Sometimes it will be argued that much press criticism occurs in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, in the new reviews that have sprung up in many cities, in the underground press. But such an argument misses the point. Because foreign policy is analyzed in *Foreign Affairs* and other such "small" journals does not exempt the newspress from a critical responsibility in foreign affairs. The point is that the press should be analyzed for the audience which regularly consumes the press—the newspaper reader—and not merely for coteries of professionals and students that queue up before the *Chicago Journalism Review*.

It is often argued that criticism of the press is found in the newspaper because the press reports the statements of its critics and in turn press professionals respond. But this is wholly inadequate. First, it is altogether too sporadic and undisciplined. The criticism awaits some public figure or celebrity becoming exercised and lashing out at what he takes to be unfair treatment. Journalists usually respond in kind and the public then takes its choice among opinions. Moreover, it is usually opinions undisciplined on both sides by fact or substantial analysis, a kind of shouting match that usually talks by the point in question. Shall we admit that those who make news by assailing the press are not usually the best critics, are often engaged in grinding their own special axe? Shall we also admit that the press does not take kindly to criticism and usually responds in the most uninformative manner? Gay Talese speaks to the point:

I think that journalists perhaps . . . become through the years of writing about others and not being written about ourselves—maybe

we become thin-skinned, or unaccustomed I should say, to being written about objectively . . . People in the arts have to be willing to accept incredible criticism from the press, from the critics—whereas the press does not have critics. It should.

From another floor of the newspaper Barry Bingham makes much the same point:

We are, let's face it, establishment men of a particular kind. We possess a pretty intoxicating measure of power. It is our privileged function to criticize everybody else, including the politicians we help to elect. At the same time we tend to respond to criticism of our actions with startled and red-faced outrage.

In making such responses the press often violates every standard of journalism. Journalists generally agree that dispassionate language and analysis, where affect is tightly controlled and information is maximized, are the appropriate mode of reasoned public discourse. But any criticism of the press or threat is treated as a matter of high drama. It calls forth new versions of Armageddon and the most stereotyped, bloated language imaginable. Norman Isaacs in the *Columbia Journalism Review*:

The date was June 29, 1972—and while the countdown to 1984 stood at eleven years and six months, one had to reflect that George Orwell was, after all, author, not infallible seer. The Supreme Court of the United States, by five to four vote, ruled that the power of a grand jury took precedence over the heretofore presumed protection of the first amendment.

The problem here is in Mr. Isaacs' facts and tone. How can something be right—the sly inclusion of presumed almost saves it—that has never been recognized in common, constitutional or legislative law? Moreover, the lead violates every standard of argument known to journalism. He is talking about an important problem, but he brings to it deceptive high church rhetoric. When educators, let us say, respond in angry and flamboyant language to newspaper articles written about them and their institutions, the press takes this as a failure of educators to understand the process of free and open argument and inquiry. Rarely does the press respond in the language they expect from others, and all too often banners of constitutional rights and the people's right to know are used to paper over real difficulties.

The practice of reporting attacks by government along with responses by professional journalists is simply gruel too thin for our needs. The Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* has specialized in printing messages from the administration, messages which are subsequently answered by Tom Wicker or James Reston or Lester Markel. Meanwhile, the public increasingly withdraws respect from the partners in this verbal tennis match who largely reflect narrow and partisan attitudes towards public need.

Let me anticipate two more responses to the argument that the press is perhaps the least criticized of our important institutions. Editors often point to attempts on the part of some newspapers to create columns about the press or to create a new role within the newspaper, that of ombudsman. I applaud both of these gestures, look upon them as promising, and wish to say nothing that would discourage them. When the first effort is mentioned, the example is usually the *Washington Post* and its column "News Business." The ombudsman is often identified with the pioneering effort of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and its ombudsman, John Herchenroeder. Similar positions have been created at a number of other newspapers often under a less European title.

Neither of these practices is completely sufficient. The "News Business" column at the *Post* was written by Ben Bagdikian and undoubtedly will be written in the future by a professional newsman. Much as I admire Mr. Bagdikian's work, I hope that he would agree that one needs sustained critical attention from intellectuals, scholars, writers and ordinary citizens that are outside the apparatus of the newspaper, not merely deviant and unusually courageous within it.

The ombudsman suffers from the same ailment of being within the newspaper, internal to it rather than outside of it, and while it does mean that errors are taken seriously, followed up and corrected, and thereby is responsive to the public, it is less than a complete response. It does not necessarily breed ongoing criticism; it does not allow outsiders to take the initiative except in response to detectable errors of fact, attribution and judgment. While it enlarges the critical compass, it does not create a sufficiently diverse forum for the critical examination of the newspaper.

A final defense against criticism is usually expressed as the belief that the public does not, and probably cannot, understand newspapers, and that independent critics, because they are not journal-

ists, are not qualified to criticize the press. This is argument by mystification. When a university president rejects criticism directed against him and his institution because journalists are not academics and cannot hope to understand the university, the press quite properly points out that every institution attempts to protect itself by hiding behind special mysteries of the craft, mysteries decipherable only by the initiated and that the mystery behind the mystery is that there is no mystery at all. Newspapers defend themselves against outside criticism in the same terms they properly reject when offered by the institutions they cover.

This position is often presented in a decent but misplaced way. Some publishers understand that the public knows little about the operations of newspapers and, therefore, should be educated. Barry Bingham has argued that newspaper credibility suffers because readers do not understand newspapers.

But whose fault is it that so many people misread their papers and misunderstand their actions? Surely publishers and editors are at least partly to blame for failing to instruct the public in the fundamentals of how a newspaper operates. There will always be malignant critics who choose to misinterpret the motives of journalists. There are a great many others, however, who go honestly but hopelessly astray in their efforts to follow what we are doing.

There is truth in this but the implication is wrong. We do not want the press educating us about the press any more than we want the State Department educating us about foreign policy. And it is impossible to turn this task over to the schools. Most people do not go to college, and the task could not be accomplished with everyone in forced enrollment. No, the critical education will have to occur within the newspapers themselves but not by the newspapers and professional journalists, at least exclusively.

I sometimes feel, and I do not wish to be overly argumentative here, that the press has been corrupted by its own influence. Since World War II we have witnessed a decline in the independent influence of character-forming, culture-bearing agencies such as religion, the family, the ethnic group and neighborhood. The Commission on Freedom of the Press recognized this, perhaps even encouraged it, and argued that the press itself would have to become an authoritative source of values, would have to, along with the schools, enter the vacuum left by the decline of older agencies of

culture and character. The press has happily stepped into this vacuum not only for the profit it brings but also for the influence it yields. Journalists, particularly those drawn in from the arts and the "new journalists," have also sensed the new avenue to power and fame through the press. But as the press has become more important, as it has become more professional, as it has become the spokesman for the community, it has also become more remote from community life. And whenever there is remoteness of an institution, a critical community grows to mediate between that institution and the community itself.

The emergence of a critical community should not be resisted by the press; it should be encouraged. Criticism is not the mark of failure and irrelevance; it is the sign of vigor and importance. In the Soviet Union the arts are not only actively censored but hyper-criticized within Soviet bureaucracy. While there is an unfortunate side to this, it does suggest a positive value. In the Soviet Union poetry and literature are taken to be important; the work of artists is taken to be an active part of life, crucial material in the shaping and definition of Russian culture. American artists should be so fortunate. Here they can do anything and not only does the government ignore them, but the general community, when it is not yawning, merely collects their work for status or investment.

The criticism of the press in America, as sporadic, as inadequate, as ill-intended as it often is, is a tribute to the importance of the press in American life, an importance felt not only by government officials but by the community generally. The proper response is not a retreat behind slogans and defensive postures but the encouragement of an active and critical tradition and an important body of professional critics.

Because such a critical community has not emerged the press feels itself under greater attack than ever before. The last time this occurred in a sustained way was during the McCarthy era. Then the attack was primarily directed against television, movies and the presumed left-wing press. Today all the media and all newspapers are feeling the criticism, and they react from weakness, as if they are fragile institutions being buffeted about by hostile winds and about to fall before the onslaught. There is some truth in this response but not much. By becoming more professional, in the narrow sense of the self-enhancing, the press is going the way of other professions—teaching, medicine, law, architecture—that can

no longer adequately connect with their communities and whose power and remoteness breed indifference or hostility, a hostility that flashes into the open when touched by an administration spokesman. The answer is not, I think, response in kind but the creation of a tradition of press criticism that will reconnect the newspaper to the community it serves.

But how does a newspaper connect with its community? The most generally accepted method of connection is through the roles of the representative and spectator. Here the newspaper is the eyes and ears of the audience; it goes where the reader cannot go, so that the newspaper is representing the audience at city hall because the audience as an assembled community, a public, cannot be present. It is in this vein that the newspaper takes itself to be representing the public, or more fashionably these days, the people. This is a noble role but, as I have already indicated, it possesses a fatal weakness: the community to be represented has become remarkably dissolved, is in eclipse. The evidence of this eclipse is that the newspaper has little contact of any direct kind, physical or verbal, with this community. In effect, the entire system of communication has become one of address: that is, the people are spoken to, are informed, are often propagandized but in no sense are their own perceptions, understandings, judgments fed back into the process. Certainly the letters-to-the-editor column does represent some kind of community return to the source of information, but this column, often the best column in the newspaper, is radically underutilized and constitutes a thin trickle of return to an outpouring of information.

In effect, the press principally connects to its audience by being an informer of relatively passive spectators. But this is a radically attenuated sense of representation. In fact, I think it is not a system of representation at all. The reporter at city hall less represents his audience than he represents his profession in both its commercial and literary aspects. This mode of representation or connection has led to the progressive distancing of the newspaper from its audience, a fact to which I have already alluded. That is, the newspaper becomes effectively responsible to itself: to its own professional standards and to its own commercial needs. In the process it loses contact with its audience who, like the spectator at the construction of a new building grotesquely marring a community, are asked to bow to the standards of the professionals constructing the building when

those standards are not even explained let alone defended.

A second and more desirable method of connection is through criticism; that is, through the creation of an ongoing process of judgment that sets standards for the production, distribution and consumption of journalism, and in which the community participates in significant ways. There are, at the moment, three modes of criticism: two of them are inadequate and it is to the third that I wish to pay major attention.

The first form of criticism is what we might call criticism by standards of public or social responsibility. This is the form of criticism that we have largely talked about up to this point. It involves the discussion of freedom, rights and objectivity. As a critical process it largely involves various government officials and members of the press who have, at this point, largely succeeded in talking by one another and the public. The weakness of this situation has led to the recommendation for national and local press councils to be the vehicle of assessment of social responsibility.

Are such institutions the answer? I think not. In the United States national press councils are likely to be presided over by blue-ribbon panels though run by a professional staff. That is, the blue-ribbon panel is selected so as to represent the community under the theory that the press itself does not and cannot adequately represent the public interest. This interest also cannot be represented by government. These panels always have a warming air of reassurance to them; like quasi-judicial regulatory bodies, they are composed of men taken to be pillars of the community or, more likely these days, to represent the various segments, class and ethnic, of a community. Unfortunately, in the United States the operation of these councils is likely to be invested in the hands of professional staffs and the blue-ribbon panel is likely to be remote from their everyday operation. The idea of a press council sounds like a fine idea because it is so British and I have no doubt that such councils can work in more aristocratic societies where there are men with enough general learning, cultural depth, commitment to the public interest, and leisure to participate in more than pro forma ways. In the United States press councils are likely to become one more bureaucracy.

What about local press councils? Perhaps they will work, but I am not sanguine for the reasons announced above. The people who are expected to participate in the details and time-consuming

work of such councils—participation absolutely necessary if they are not to become bureaucratized—are already riddled by over-participation. This crisis in participation has already defeated some of the best elements of the public and does not augur well for local councils.

While the attempt to create a critical tradition of discussion on the public responsibility of the press is perhaps an advance over viewing the press merely as a representative of the people, it is still not an effective answer to the problems we face and, as many journalists and publishers feel, may have its own peculiar dangers and pitfalls.

A second critical tradition to connect the public with the media is that proposed by the social scientists and might be called scientific criticism. Here the standards for judging the press are not abstract rights, or codes of press performances or press council evaluations of responsibility—all things on which social scientists are rather quiet—but standards derived from scientific studies of the impact of the media upon audiences. The prototype here is the national commissions on violence and pornography where the fitness, rightness, and suitability of the material are judged not by intrinsic merit or abstract rights but by the effect the material has on audience attitudes and behavior. This standard of criticism is simply wrongheaded. Its disastrous results already can be seen in the report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, for the social scientific standards are in a general way destructive of culture. The questions permit no consideration of the quality, truth, or reasonableness of material, and it is obvious that any criticism of the press cannot merely test audience reactions—this would enshrine public opinion into an even more unbearable niche than it now occupies—but must work toward autonomous standards in which the audience participates but which does not allow the mere criterion of audience appetite to dictate the cultural terms of journalism.

A third tradition of criticism can be termed cultural criticism and defined, first of all, by what it excludes. Cultural criticism is not debate over abstract shibboleths such as the people's right to know, problems of access, protection of reporters' sources or standards of press performance derived from abstract canons. As much as these items may occasionally enter the critical tradition, they do not constitute such a tradition in any significant measure. By cul-

tural criticism I mean an ongoing process of exchange, of debate between the press and its audience and, in particular, those among the audience most qualified by reason of motive and capacity to enter the critical arena. But what is the substance of this criticism, toward what is it directed? Earlier on I argued that a democratic tradition of criticism required at least three things: a set of procedures for indicating how we observe what we observe, a language relatively neutral in terms of affect or emotional coloring, and a forum in which an active response can be made to the procedures of observation and the language of description. In addition I indicated certain habits of mind were necessary: a desire to take account of contrary findings, to correct errors and revise postulates. These are the terms and manners of press criticism at the highest level of development and also the form and character of criticism that are in the shortest supply.

I am arguing that press criticism is essentially the criticism of language: it is a vital response on the part of the public to the language the press uses to describe events and to the events that accepted standards of journalistic language allow to be described. It is fully analogous to literary criticism or criticism of any cultural object: an assessment of the adequacy of the methods men use to observe the world, the language they use to describe the world, and the kind of world that such methods and language imply is in existence. It requires therefore close public attention to the methods, procedures and techniques of journalistic investigation and the language of journalistic reporting. Moreover, this scrutiny must occur before the same audience that every day consumes the end product of these procedures and language. This is the basic critical act in journalism, or so I take it, but I take it also to be the case that little criticism of this kind is in existence and that which is in existence—found largely in the reviews—rarely reaches the public.

It is a remarkable fact that each year most of us read more words by a reporter such as Homer Bigart of the *New York Times* than we do of Plato and yet today 2500 years after Plato wrote there is more critical work published on Plato every year than there is on Bigart. In fact, there is nothing published on Bigart, here used as an archetypal reporter, yet what he writes provides the critical diet for a major segment of the national "elite" community. I myself have read more words by James Reston than perhaps any other human, living or dead, yet I have never seen this work "re-

viewed" or criticized except when a few pieces are collected in book form and then the review is inevitably by a comrade in the press. It is an anomalous fact that all of us consume more words by journalists than any other group and yet our largest and perhaps most important literary diet is never given close critical scrutiny in any systematic way. In universities we critically review the work of men in every field, devoting thousands of hours to the perceptions, methods and style of obscure 18th-century Romantic poets, yet never consider that journalists, who daily inform our lives, require, for their good and ours, at least the same critical attention. In journalism schools, preoccupied as they are with teaching the givens of the craft plus the academic asides in press history and law, critical attention is rarely given to journalistic procedure or writing or the major figures whose work exemplifies the strengths and limitations of journalism practice. Moreover, unlike other professions, journalists rarely gather to critically review one another's work, to expose its weaknesses, errors of commission and omission, and its failure to live up to professional let alone public standards. Let me make the judgment general: journalists, of all groups who expose their work to the public, are less critically examined by professional critics, the public or their colleagues. At journalistic gatherings professionals do not critique one another's work; they give one another awards.

Why should this be true? There are a number of reasons deriving from the nature of journalism but a fundamental reason is that journalism is rarely thought of as a literary act, parallel with the novel, the essay and the scientific report. However, journalism is, before it is a business, an institution or a set of rights, a body of literature. Like all literature journalism is a creative and imaginative work, a symbolic strategy; journalism sizes up situations, names their elements and names them in a way that contains an attitude toward them. Journalism provides what Kenneth Burke calls strategies for situations—"strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation and desanctification, consolation, and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another." Journalism provides audiences with models for action and feeling, with ways to size up situations. It shares these qualities with all literary acts and therefore like all literary acts must be kept under constant critical examination for the manner, method and purpose whereby it carries out these actions.

Journalism is not only literary art; it is industrial art. The inverted pyramid, the 5 W's lead, and associated techniques are as much a product of industrialization as tin cans. The methods, procedures and canons of journalism were developed not only to satisfy the demands of the profession but to meet the needs of industry to turn out a mass-produced commodity. These canons are enshrined in the profession as rules of news selection, judgment, and writing. Yet they are more than mere rules of communication. They are, like the methods of the novelists, determiners of what can be written and in what way. In this sense the techniques of journalism define what is considered to be real: what can be written about and how it can be understood. From the standpoint of the audience the techniques of journalism determine what the audience can think—the range of what is taken to be real on a given day. If something happens that cannot be packaged by the industrial formula, then, in a fundamental sense, it has not happened, it cannot be brought to the attention of the audience. If something happens that is only rendered in distorted fashion by the canons of journalism, then it is rendered in such distorted fashion, often without correction.

Now I am overstating the case to give a deliberate emphasis. We do not think of the conventions of journalistic investigation and reporting as stylistic strategies which not only report the world but bring a certain kind of world into existence. These canons, as I think I could demonstrate if space allowed, were derived from 19th-century utilitarianism and today reflect a basically utilitarian-scientific-capitalistic orientation toward events. The conventions of journalism implicitly dissect events from a particular point of view. It is a point of view that emphasizes, as one would expect from utilitarianism, the role of personalities or actors in the creation of events and ties the definition of news to timeliness. What these conventions lack, to engage in a little criticism of my own, are precisely those elements of news which constitute the basic information on which popular rule rests: historical background and continuity, the motives and purposes of political actors, and the impact of technology, demographic change and other impersonal forces which contribute so much to the shape of contemporary events.

We must, in short, devote continuous critical attention to the methods and conventions of journalism for these methods and conventions order the world we live in into a comprehensible or baffling

whole. Many of the conventions in which journalism is rooted—the inverted pyramid style, the obsessive reliance on the interview as a method of observation—are products of the 19th century and their contemporary existence implies a silent conspiracy between journalists and audiences to keep the doors of the house locked tight even though all the windows have blown out. What we lamely call the conventions of journalism were developed for another time and place. They were designed to report an orderly world of politics, international alignments, class structure and culture. Such conventions reflected and enhanced this order and fleshed out with incidental information an already settled mode of life. Human interest, entertainment, trivia, political events could be rendered in a straightforward 5 W's manner for they occurred within a setting of secure meanings and structures. Today the structure is not set and the meanings are not firm. Politics, culture, classes, generations, and international alignments are not at all orderly, yet we still filter them through conventional glasses which reduce them to type, which exorcise the realities of the world through conventional stylistics and conventional names. Indeed, this is what is meant by the now occasionally heard epithet that “communications is a menace.”

Let me give three examples of the way in which journalism as a stylistic strategy renders a disservice to its audience. The examples are not new or unusual; in fact, they are well known. The first case is the reporting on Viet Nam. Allow me an extended quote from an essay I wrote in 1967:

How does one render the reality that is Viet Nam in intelligible terms? The question is not merely rhetorical, for increasingly the ability of the American people to order and enhance their existence depends on their ability to know what really is going on. But we have this great arrogance about “communications.” We treat problems of understanding as exercises in message transmittal. So here we sit shrouded in plastic, film, magnetic tape, photographs and lines of type thinking that two minutes of film or four column inches of canned type adequately render what is happening in Viet Nam or for that matter anywhere else. In point of fact, the conventions of broadcast and newspaper journalism are just about completely inadequate to “tell” this story. I am not merely caviling about turning the war into an elaborate accounting exercise of hills, tonnage and dead (after all, that is the only measure of hope and progress one has in such a war). But why is this after all a war of accounting exercises? What are the political realities that

underscore the day to day events? They are known—dimly of course—and can be found in the pages of more esoteric journals of opinion and in a half hour conversation with a war correspondent when he is not talking through an inverted pyramid. But this is not a war that affects elites alone nor is it a time when we can all spend after hours with exhausted correspondents. What is sinful is that what is known about the war, and, what is the same thing, the stylistics that can render this knowledge rarely make their way to the television screen or the newspapers. There the conventions of the craft reduce what is a hurly-burly, disorganized, fluid, non-rectilinear war into something that is straight, balanced, and moving in rectilinear ways. The conventions not only report the war but they endow it, *pari passu*, with an order and logic—an order and logic which simply mask the underlying realities. Consequently, for opponents and advocates of the war, as well as those betwixt and between, the war haunts consciousness like a personal neurosis rather than a reality to be understood.

And to make the case contemporary, one need only look at the ludicrous story to which we have been subject in the last year: the attempt to find and define the last American killed in Viet Nam. The story, so natural to our accepted procedures, merely masked the reality of the war, as if it were a conflict with a beginning, middle and end. Viet Nam might have been a story but it is not like one of those we read in our youth.

Second, American journalism is still absurdly tied to events and personalities. American journalists are, in general, at a loss for what to do on the days when there isn't any news breaking. We have not learned how to report to the underlife of the country, how to get at the subterranean and frequently glacial movements that provide the meaningful substructure which determines the eruption of events and the emergence of personalities that we now call news. We still do not know how to bring to life the significance of the invisible: a slow shift in Black migration patterns out of the South, the relation between grain sales to the Soviet Union and grain elevators failing in small Illinois towns, the significance of the reduction of the birthrate and the strains created by radically unequal age cohorts, the relatively rapid embourgeoisment of Blacks—all these "events" which, because they are not tied to personalities or timeliness, escape daily journalism yet constitute the crucial stories determining the American future.

A third example I draw from a colleague, Howard Ziff. The conventions of journalism have led to an increased distance be-

tween "the Press and the pace and detail of everyday life." The ordinary events of everyday lives—things which in their meaning and consequence are far from ordinary and insignificant for the audience—have no place in daily journalism. We lack the techniques of investigation and the methods of writing to tell what it feels like to be a Black, or a Pole, or a woman—or, God forbid, a journalist or professor today. This mainstream of overwhelming significant ordinary life—what a literary critic would call the "felt quality" of life—is a main connection between the newspaper and its audience, yet we do not know how to report it well. As a result the newspaper reports a world which increasingly does not connect with the life of its audience in the most fundamental sense that the audience experiences life.

The basic critical act in journalism is public scrutiny of the methods by which journalists define and get what we call news and the conventions by which they deliver it to the public. This criticism must not only be sustained and systematic, as with literary criticism, but it must also occur in the pages of the newspaper itself, in front of the audience that regularly consumes, uses or digests what is presented. Who should do it? In a certain sense, everyone. I have suggested that the newspaper itself must bring this critical community into existence. It must search out and find within its public those laymen that can and are interested in making a critical response to what they see and read daily. Hopefully such people will come from all strata of the public and represent its major segments. But such a community will not come into existence if the press passively awaits its appearance. The press must recognize that it has a stake in the creation of a critical community and then use its resources to foster it. For it is only through criticism that news and the newspaper can meet the standard set out for it by Robert Park: "The function of news is to orient man and society in an actual world. Insofar as it succeeds it tends to preserve the sanity of the individual and the permanence of society."